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Project *sigma*: the temporality of activism

Vlad Morariu and Jaakko Karhunen

The following chapter will focus on *sigma*, a network of cultural practitioners that was active roughly between 1963-1965. This highly ambitious project involved a network of writers, artists, scientists and psychiatrists, including William Burroughs, Jeff Nuttall and R.D. Laing. Its successes were modest: the most tangible outcome of the project was the *sigma portfolio*, an expanding, self-published collection of texts (Trocchi, 1964), ‘part manifesto, part manual’ for art activism (Wark, 2011: 126). Its initiator and convener was Alexander Trocchi, the Scottish novelist, poet, situationist and drug addict. Our intention is to present a close reading of *sigma* essays to explore the unfolding of an art activist logic within the programmatic texts of the *portfolio*.

The very legitimacy of the concept of art activism, or politically effective art, rests on a claim about the power and autonomy of art. This claim maintains that a certain political form is to be found in the very act of making art. Structurally similar to an Austinian performative (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; compare with Derrida, 1988), art activism is ‘doing’ politics with artⁱ. It empowers communities and individuals and facilitates democratic access. Admittedly, one could differentiate among degrees of art’s effectiveness. Boris Groys proposed that art becomes politically effective ‘only when it is made beyond or outside the art market – in the context of direct political propaganda [...] its production, evaluation, and distribution do not follow the logic of the market’ (Groys, 2008: 6).

We would like to observe how important the spatial metaphor is in Groys’s claim. It is also common currency in the early history of artistic institutional critique. In this tradition, the

question of the power of art is conceived in spatial terms: if the air in museums and galleries is unbreathable, then what one needs to do is to find new spaces outside, or on the fringes of the system, or at least inside autonomous zones within the systemⁱⁱ. We would like to propose, however, that although spatiality is a necessary condition for the realisation of art's transformative power, it is not sufficient. The distinction Groys proposes between (art) commodities produced, distributed, and consumed on the art market and (artistic) political propaganda also stems from the purchase the latter have on temporality. Politically effective art articulates an ideological vision and imagination.

Whereas the market functions through the intervention of an 'invisible hand' – operating within the flattened time of commodity exchange – politically effective art has a purchase on how 'another world could be possible': an imagination for the future. Therefore, one needs to supplement the concern about spatiality with an equally important reflection on temporality. The question is not only where to 'do' politics with art, but also when - hence the urgency of acting 'now'; and for how long - not merely bringing something into existence, but considering its persistence; the point of time in which it is created and kind of future it has?

Our aim here is to unpack the *sigma* other-logic, which in our view rests on a particular articulation of space and time. We are not glorifying *sigma* as radical practice; nevertheless, we believe that in *sigma*'s very concept, definition and creative (dis)organisation, there is a sense of visionary credence, and a powerful belief in the possibility of surpassing the status quo and resisting the apparent erasure of the future. *sigma* articulates, in our interpretationⁱⁱⁱ, an interesting case for the power of art: but instead of a revolution, *sigma* proposed an insurrection; instead of confronting brute matter, *sigma* proposed a change 'in the minds' of humans; instead of representing politics, *sigma* attempted to 'do' politics through the

anarchic production of an excess of writing and publishing. Can *sigma* be relevant in today's globalised world, precisely when, to put it in Mark Fisher's words, we experience 'the slow cancellation of the future?' (Fisher, 2014: 2–29)?

The 1960s, Violence and Sickness

We will approach the context of *sigma*'s emergence obliquely, through a radiography of the early 1960s, proposed at the end of the decade by one of *sigma*'s main associates, Jeff Nuttall. A controversial personality himself, Jeff Nuttall's *Bomb Culture* is interesting precisely because it focuses on themes which are still actual: the shrinking of the imagination of the future; the widespread social malaise; and an acute sense of class and state violence.

Michael Horowitz described Nuttall's book as 'a primary source and manifesto for the post-Hiroshima generation' (Horowitz, 2004). Indeed, every corner of Nuttall's book is haunted by the vision of the world's demise, conjured by the potentiality of an irresponsible triggering of the atom bomb. 'Sick', the fourth chapter of *Bomb Culture*, begins with an acknowledgment of the decline of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and of the anti-bomb movement, which Nuttall was a part of. By date the gulf between what governments were saying and what governments were doing had become incommensurable. Moreover, it was increasingly difficult to speak to political power starting from shared frameworks of value. But this was not a failure of political power alone: society, as a whole, had lost its 'appetite for life'. It had become clear that

society looked forward to the death it had contrived [...], that we ourselves even lacked the will of colonial dissidents, that none of us was sufficiently alarmed about extinction to force the murderers to put down their weapons, that society commanded nothing but contempt, much less dedicated labour or respect for law, that love, honour, faith, selflessness were as false in ourselves as in our elders, that the only effective thing to do

was what we daren't do – riot and destroy the death machine in a demonstration of serious protest, that the only thing that we *could* do was sit in humiliation and wait for extinction (Nuttall, 1968: 105).

The last two lines of this paragraph are particularly thought-provoking: they account for the slow substitution of the vision of what *had* to be done (the radical destruction of society in its current form of living) with a pragmatic-realist vision of what could be done: sit and wait for extinction. In a certain sense, if not entirely making the leap into post-ideology, this substitution already points to a shrinking of the space of ideological visibility. There is only one form of imagination possible – the nuclear mushroom looming on the surface of the earth, a replay of Hiroshima, in short, nuclear annihilation. Thus, the question is *not* what needs to be done, but how to wait for the end?

Nuttall mentions three possible answers to this question: first, a depressive passivity and isolation; second, a hedonistic search for sensation and for the 'kick of the moment'; third, the loss of the ability to feel, the loss of affection for the fate of the other, and a disaffected and nihilistic sublimation into dark humour where all values are negated. Nuttall, as well as many of his collaborators – like Trocchi – embraced the latter, the 'humour of someone who was ill, sick', and whose publicly recognisable symptoms were used 'as a last banner to brandish under the noses of the squares as a syphilitic might display his chances to a puritan' (Nuttall, 1968: 107).

Bomb Culture resonates with diagnoses of contemporary culture, upon which we will return towards the end of this chapter. To anticipate, Nuttall's insistence on illness – social illness, but also self-induced corporeal illness (through the abuse of drugs) and mental illness - finds a correspondence in Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's and Mark Fisher's insistence on the anxious and

depressed subjects of semio-capitalism (Berardi, 2009, 2011; Fisher, 2009, 2014). For Nuttall, sickness is as much real as it is symbolical of a range of much celebrated counter-cultural practices. A telling example would be the writing that would become heroin addict William Burroughs' 'slaughterhouse carnival' of the *Naked Lunch* (Nuttall, 1968: 107).

It is, thus, understandable why Nuttall, along with a large part of the British counter-culture in the early 1960s, would feel drawn to R.D. Laing's attempts to politicise madness. Nuttall's 'Sick' cites at large from one of Laing's 'sigmatic' texts, a version of which had also been included in the *sigma* portfolio, before becoming the second chapter in Laing's *The Politics of Experience* (1967). Laing argued that mental illness was primarily a social and political concept. Equally preoccupied with the urgencies of the 'current time', the main point of his text is that psychotherapy fails unless it considers the individual within the nexus of his/her social relations (Laing, 1967: 39-48). Laing was critical of the psychotherapies that objectified the human being, thereby reproducing political violence. The result is '[...] a shambles. Bodies half dead; genitals dissociated from heart; heart severed from head; heads dissociated from genitals. Without inner unity, with just enough sense of continuity to clutch at identity [...] a half-crazed creature in a mad world' (Laing, 1967: 46).

The 'constant terror of inconceivable violence' (Nuttall, 1968: 127) is what had produced this sick, 'half-crazed creature in a mad world.' What is sickness, though? Elaborating from his *Divided Self* (Laing, 2010), Laing was already working on this question, and Nuttall followed: if values are to be rejected, then the distinction between the sane and the sick is untenable. From this perspective the antipsychiatric experiment in Kingsley Hall can be conceived as case where sickness becomes an ideological form. The therapeutic community of Kingsley Hall was instituted in 1965 by Laing, David Cooper, Leon Redler and Joseph

Berke – its guiding idea was that one needs to experience madness and take it to its ultimate consequences in order to emerge healed, at the other side.^{iv} As for Nuttall, sickness becomes the very ground on which a new culture is articulated:

We were eaten up by repressed violence and we were soured by the constant terror of inconceivable violence being committed on ourselves and the rest of man (*sic*). From this we had strugglingly produced a culture. [...] Sickness was, then, for many, a will to enact some definitive ceremony of violence that would spend the aggression inherent in the collective subconscious, exorcise it and thus leave society cleansed of fear, with a clear way out for our over-accumulated frustrated energies (Nuttall, 1968: 132).

We would like to emphasise the ‘ceremonial’, i.e. symbolic aspect of violence in Nuttall’s thinking. Gillian Whiteley has written a seminal text that emphasises Nuttall’s role as masterminder and promotor of happenings, performance and installation art, as well as his involvement in the clandestine counter-cultural press (Whiteley, 2011). The novelty of these cultural forms, throughout the early 1960s, can be comprehended as ‘ceremonies of violence’ – as the unrestrained multiplication of ephemeral artistic and cultural forms, merging spit, scat and blood with the violence of language, colonising the undergrounds of the cities. Much of this would characterise the vision of space and time unfolding in *sigma*, Alexander Trocchi’s project, within which Nuttall was actively involved.

Originally from Glasgow, Trocchi edited the English literary journal *Merlin* in Paris in the beginning of the 1950s, before moving to New York (Wark, 2011: 127). His best-known work is *Cain’s Book* (1960), in which the author’s alter ego, Necchi, tries to negotiate his way in the world via heroin abuse, and by embracing his alienation from the bourgeois order. As McKenzie Wark notes, after the literary success of *Cain’s Book*, the *sigma portfolio* made it possible for ‘Trocchi to abandon literature and yet keep writing’ (Wark, 2011: 129).

Michael Gardiner suggests that Trocchi's political position formed while he was editing *Merlin* in Paris, from 1952 to 1954, along coordinates similar to those we have just developed here: 'Faced with nuclear destruction and totalitarianism, a non-binaristic, non-"political" way of thinking politics had become necessary' (Gardiner, 2006: 79). What *sigma* interestingly adds is precisely the question of persistence through collective organisation: *sigma* was meant not only as spontaneous articulation of energies, but also as sustainable cultural infrastructure.

The Space-Time of *sigma*

Sigma is a letter taken from the Greek alphabet and used in mathematics. The capital letter (Σ) is used to express the summation whereas the small case letter (σ) expresses standard deviation – the quantification of the difference between the mean value and each individual member of a group. Sigma, therefore, is a metonym: it maps symbolically the space of relational possibilities – the manner in which individual entities stand to each other, or relate to each other in a group. For Alexander Trocchi, a prolific though inconsistent writer and one of the main characters of the 1960s counter-establishment, *sigma* was the abbreviation for the coming 'invisible insurrection' within which 'all men (*sic*) must eventually be included', whether they are aware of its existence or not. *sigma* would not designate an agenda, or a political group. In the foundational manifestos there is no trace of identification with traditional political polarities of left and right: it refuses traditional party politics, and all kind of patronisation of art and culture by political vectors. The term *sigma* was to be used rather in its adjectival sense (i.e. *sigmatic*), pointing to a range of creative practices, programmatically laid out by Trocchi in two founding texts: *sigma: a tactical blueprint* and *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds*. These essays articulate the kernel of what became the main tool for *sigma*'s activity – the publication and distribution of the *sigma portfolio*, a

collection of texts meant to reach their destinations through the mail, but also by other means of clandestine distribution.

The programmatic texts of *sigma* are concerned with the analysis of ‘the current situation’; both in the sense of ‘present time’ (in relation to the impossibility of a future emerging from the conditions of possibility of the present) and in relation to space, geography, and political economy. From this point of view, Trocchi observes that the modern world has the capacity and the resources to solve the problem of production. As he explains, ‘[T]he urgent problem of the future is that of distribution which is presently (dis)ordered in terms of the economic system prevailing in this or that area’. (INV: 2).

In 1963, when this text was first published, Trocchi’s main concern was not production or the necessity of labour or work time spent within the process of production – such as it was discussed in classical Marxism. Nor was it the problem of distribution. Trocchi argued that the problem of wealth distribution is principally an ‘administrative one,’ and that it can potentially be solved on global scale by institutions such as the United Nations (INV: 2). In other words, the system has the capacity to take care of itself and regulate any dysfunctionalities in production and distribution. One way or another, Trocchi thought that distribution would eventually be solved through a better organisation of the institutional nexus. Turning his attention from these topics Trocchi used the *Invisible Insurrection* to examine the perceived loss of leisure and leisure time. In other words, Trocchi argued that his contemporaries were incapable of giving themselves free time.

We will approach the distinction between the structures of work time and leisure time below; at the moment it should be emphasised that this distinction rests on a particular conception of

one's situatedness in time and space. Trocchi proposed that few people realised that an evolutionary change had taken place: an evolution that had occurred 'in the minds of men (sic)' triggered by an awareness 'of the implications of self-consciousness' (BLU: 1). This change first took place in modern science, with the change of perception of what 'an objective world' meant: that the perception of the world is not and cannot be objective, that it is implicated in the way that the world appears. Likewise, a change had taken place in what became to be known as modern art, with its 'destruction of the conventional object'. In fact, Trocchi conceived art as capable of expressing this evolutionary change, while science offered the means through which one could hope to identify and solve the problems of situating oneself in this new historical age.

Having a first-hand experience of a range of new cultural and artistic ceremonials (happenings, installations, objectless art), Trocchi came very close to defining a new understanding for contemporaneity of life. And this took place well before the advent of conceptual art as well as before the emergence of 'contemporary art' in Peter Osborne's sense of postconceptual art (Osborne, 2013). Contemporaneity is the coming together of disjunct subjective temporalities, disciplines, and practices, which call for the destruction and recomposition of life, thought, and sensibility. The sudden conjunction of these elements calls for a new mode of expression. Hence the necessity of reconfiguring the 'grids of expression', the need to find new concepts, at the level of the language in general, but also at the level of specific languages: the language of literature, for example, with the destruction of traditional canons; or the language of art – which cannot be but reconfiguration of the traditionally separated arts; or, the language of space, the conceptual matrix through which space is appropriated, but also the sciences of space - architecture and urbanism. For the

activities of *sigma*, as Trocchi suggested numerous times, can and must take place under the auspices of newly designed and newly created urban spaces.

The change should be conceived at the level of concepts, frames of thought, and language: it has to do with the power of thought, with imagination and creation. Such a change would be attainable if representatives from all of areas of knowledge production were brought together in a common enterprise:

We are writers, painters, sculptors, musicians, dancers, physicists, bio-chemists, philosophers, neurologists, engineers, and whatnots, of every race and nationality. The catalogue of such a reservoir of talent, intelligence, and power, is of itself a spur to our imagination. (BLU: 3)

According to Trocchi, this insurrectionary ‘awakening’ is not accessible to everybody. Much of the incapacity to come to one’s own conscience of contemporaneity is caused by a lost sense of freedom in relation to time: the inability to understand how to use our free time. The majority of humankind had forgotten how to fill leisure time because lives had become mechanised and technologised. Trocchi’s predicament is not far removed from our experience of everyday life in the digital age where, to put it in Berardi’s terms, not only the body, but the soul, too, is at work (Berardi, 2009). The mechanisation and technicisation of human lives are mirrored in the fact that free time is spent in the mechanical flux of news – today augmented by the semiotic fluxes of capital (from advertising to social media) - and where everything presented as ‘new’ is, in fact, a zombified repetition of the same. Vision, visuality and imagination in the contemporary condition are codified by the logic of the return of the same.

As an insurrection occurring in time and place, Trocchi believed that *sigma* could only insert itself into the capillaries of repeated uncreative time, in the undergrounds of the urban centres, and in such a way that it would change time and space from within. This is the reason why *sigma* could not be a revolutionary, momentous change in time-space – an event that dies immediately as it comes into existence. This is also why it could not occur democratically – as a movement of forces through existing space-time: the democratic choice does not exist yet because it cannot be imagined and visualised yet. *sigma* is not a *coup d'état*, in the manner in which Lenin and Trotsky understood it. It is rather a *coup de monde*, ‘more gradual, less spectacular,’ – an eminently cultural virology, which begins by intelligence becoming self-conscious.

Trocchi appears to believe in a kind of dialectic of historical violence, where ‘revolution follows repression and is followed by repression’ (GEN: 2). Thus instead of arguing for a revolutionary *coup d'état* that would be swiftly and violently repressed, Trocchi envisioned an invisible insurrection fuelled by ‘the powerhouse of the mind’ (INV: 1). The enemy, writes Trocchi, is never personal: the real enemy is ‘spiritual ignorance breeding fear, hysteria, schizophrenia’ (GEN: 2) As the state is ultimately comprised of individuals, it is simply ignorance against what one must operate upon. Even war and violence exerted by the state appears to originate in thought. Therefore, the change in the consciousness of individuals is all that is required for a *sigmatic* rupture of the world⁹. ‘What must occur [...] is a revelation’, which includes the perception of ‘the forces that are at work in the world’;

[...] then, calmly, without indignation, by a kind of mental ju-jitsu that is ours by virtue of intelligence, of modifying, correcting, polluting, deflecting, corrupting, eroding, outflanking ... inspiring what we might call the invisible insurrection. (INV: 2)

The metaphor of the ‘mental ju-jitsu’ here is borrowed from the Japanese martial arts: it is the art of defeating an armed opponent without the use of a weapon. It suggests hard work, self-discipline, and a vigorous mind taking hold of itself, understanding its relation to the forces influencing the world – but also performing a creative and imaginative leap of faith that seems to be based on nothing but itself. A mental ju-jitsu is not a figure of aggression, though it is a figure of combat. It suggests the idea of a *sigmatic* insurrection taking place without aggressive weapons, and only through the superiority of mental discipline. And, just like in the case of ju-jitsu, the awakening of these mental forces is available to everybody. The trick here is to *give oneself time*: the time freed by the gesture of rupturing fluxes of (fake) news; or the time to see oneself as part of the nexus of social relations; or even the time of a spiritual voyage which may or may not be induced by drugs. *sigma* is precisely the opening of time when time only promises to come to an end.

Radical Pedagogies

We claimed that the *sigmatic* insurrection should be understood in terms very much different from a Leninist doctrine of state conquest. This can be seen from *sigma*’s emphasis on spontaneity, which Lenin had already critiqued more than half a century earlier. Lenin suggested that ‘the “spontaneous element” [in the workers’ movement], in essence, represents nothing more nor less than consciousness in an embryonic form. Even the primitive revolts expressed the awakening of consciousness to a certain extent’ (Lenin, 1999: 17). Yet, for Lenin, embryonic consciousness is able only to cater only for the immediate interests of the working class and is useless for its complex organisation. Only conscious mediation and reflection upon its own conditions of existence in the social totality would make it possible for the working class to realise its revolutionary potential.

How, then, does *sigmatic* spontaneity support the task of seizing the ‘grids of expression’? What facilitates the spreading of the *sigmatic* mental ju-jitsu? One concrete suggestion was the establishment of a ‘spontaneous university’. At least in principle *sigma* rejected central coordination and organisation; indeed, if anything, the spontaneous university – the instituted gathering of artists, scientists, architects, urbanists, musicians, dancers, neurologists and philosophers – was theorised as *non-hierarchical, non-structural, and non-organisational*. The spontaneous university retains the idea of ‘universality’, but rejects the specialisation of disciplines, and ‘disciplined technicians’ and experts of knowledge – the outcomes of the nineteenth-century Humboldtian university project.

There is no room in the spontaneous university for examination-based curriculums, precisely because they encourage competition and the exhibition of ‘virtuosity’ in particular areas of knowledge production. Instead, the new university would gather an international network of imaginative teachers and students, housed in a large country house, not too far from London (and, later, other metropolises), placed (necessarily) on a river bank. The traditional boundaries between teachers and students would be eliminated: what is essential here is ‘a new conscious sense of community-as-art-of-living’ where ‘the experimental situation (laboratory) with its personnel is itself to be regarded as an artefact, a continuous making, a creative process, a community enacting itself in its individual members’ (BLU: 5). The pilot project was to be started in England, but Trocchi envisaged an international network of such universities, to where its cosmopolitan members could travel, reside, and engage with the local community.

The revolutionary potential of the million ‘liberated’ minds is based precisely on the unleashing of creativity, imagination, vision and visuality, freed from the automatisms of colonised leisure time, freed from the hierarchical structures of an institution. It is rather what

exits, deserts and abandons, both spatially and temporally, the traditional environments for education, seen as conventional, violently reinforcing the status quo, and feeding off state bureaucracies. Indeed, if there is a model for the spontaneous university, it is a model of flight, secession and desertion: as Trocchi suggests, just as Oxford broke away from the Sorbonne, and Cambridge broke away from Oxford, the spontaneous university should break away from the existing educational paradigms, for only this flight would create the conditions for intelligence and creativity to emerge: ‘Secession by vital minds everywhere is the only answer’ (BLU: 4).

Integral to the *sigma project*, we argued above, is an attempted re-articulation of contemporaneity, as a conjunction of practices, disciplines, temporalities and spaces. It is not surprising, then, that a particular emphasis is placed on architecture and urbanism. Both *sigma: a Tactical Blueprint* and the *Invisible Insurrection* emphasise the roles that architects would take. They were to redesign not only spaces for creative sharing, education and knowledge production, but entire miniature towns where *sigma* members could live and work. Ideally, these centres would be located close to metropolises – they would have access to cultural phenomena happening in the bigger settlements. Trocchi calls this process ‘in(ex)filtration’. It is essential that these ‘astronauts of inner space’ would situate themselves amid new architectural settings because ‘integral art cannot be accomplished except on the level of urbanism’ (INV: 5 - 6). Changes in architectural space directly trigger changes in sensibility, thought and conceptual patterns. The concrete models offered are quite interesting: Eton College (a place of excellence unable to keep pace with time and becoming conservative), Jewish settlements in Israel; and the much-celebrated Black Mountain college (Miller, 2018; Molesworth, 2015; Katz et al., 2013).

The idea, therefore, is not to escape, or go into exile as a total abandonment of the spaces and temporality one flees from:^{vi} infiltration in the urban matrix, where life follows the rhythms of capitalist work-time is necessarily supplemented by exfiltration in the ecology of the spontaneous university, a veritable ‘experimental laboratory’, giving birth to a

community-as-art [which begins] exploring the possible functions of a society in which leisure is a dominant fact, and universal community, in which the conventional assumptions about reality and the constraints which they imply are no longer operative, in which art and life are no longer divided.’ (BLU: 5)

Infiltration feeds from exfiltration inasmuch as the spontaneous university needs the capitalist economy of production, distribution and consumption to become economically sustainable. For Trocchi, the university needs to be an ‘autonomous, unpolitical, economically independent’ (INS: 7) enterprise. It would function, for example, as an agency for recruiting young talents. Its profits would be reinvested in spreading the net and making the message more widely available, while those signed on would be granted immediate membership.

Moreover, a limited liability company would be devised (tentatively called *International Cultural Enterprises (Ltd)*), whose profits were to be invested in the research and expansion of *sigma*. Its income would derive from selling original artworks, from ‘patents’, from retail, from situationist, theatrical, or cinematic shows, and other cultural activities. Finally, income could also be generated by ‘cultural consultancy’, as *sigma* members could offer consultancy services to buyers ‘against the depreciation in value of any work or art recommended by *sigma*’ (INV: 7). What we are reading here is a pragmatic approach to organisation that has already abandoned the pleasures of utopian imaginary^{vii}; the *sigma* insurrection embraces the capitalist economy to dismantle it from within.

Seizing the ‘Grids of Expression’

The ‘spontaneous university’ is one of the means through which the grids of expression are seized; and indeed, one of the main roles of the spontaneous university is to rework inherited means of communication and expression, through the creative intersection of various areas of knowledge production. Language takes a central part in Trocchi’s programmatic texts, since they acknowledge that the transformations in science and art made obvious another fact: that the nature of all languages is relative. And if language is relative, then the question what and how to learn needs to be reconsidered:

Most of our basic educational techniques have been inherited from a past in which almost all men were ignorant of the limitations inherent in any language. They will be men and women who are alive to the fact that a child's first six years of schooling are still dedicated to providing him with the emotional furniture imposed on his father before him, and that from the beginning he is trained to respond in terms of a neuro-linguistic system (BLU: 5)

We would like to note here that the conceptual reconfiguration emphasised by *sigma*, within the ‘spontaneous university’, presupposes a process of ‘unlearning’ or ‘de-schooling’^{viii}, as a prerequisite to a recodification of language, and of the communicative situation and its instances. It would be the concepts of art and literature and their specific languages that have to be occupied, in order for such a conception of unlearning to be possible.

Here is where one finds Trocchi’s other-logic, which faces a certain conceptual poverty: the way in which Trocchi uses the concepts of art and literature are subtly different from the type of art and literature produced, distributed and consumed on the capitalist market of the 1960s. Trocchi does not promote the obstruction of the production of art literature as exchange commodities. There is no problem with artistic production – in the sense that artistic and

literary products emerge at all times, under different socio-economic conditions, including capitalism. The situation is analogous to the actual production of goods, which should not pose a problem for the highly technical stage of capitalist production, while distribution can potentially be solved with better management. Thus (and we paraphrase Groys, 2008: 6 here), we could say that there is no problem with the fact that at least a part of the production of art is easily incorporated in the capitalist distribution flows, and consumed as exchange commodities. The problem, once more, is when such a system prevails – when the ideological horizon of other types of production, distribution and consumption of art and literature is shut off.

For Trocchi, there is little in the ‘official’ art or literature of the 1960s that was able to ‘awaken’ and ‘shake’ consciousness. And by that he means works that can bring about ‘[the] situation in which life is continually renewed by art, a situation imaginatively and passionately constructed to inspire each individual to respond creatively, to bring to whatever act a creative comportment’. (INV: 3)

In other words: literature and art are produced, but they are deemed weak and ineffective – and effectiveness is to be understood here in a political sense. Politically effective art and literature are necessarily insurrectionary. Interestingly, the model that Trocchi follows is jazz, precisely because of its history – it being an art form born from the experience of/consciousness of oppression, and precisely because it ‘retains the spontaneity and vitality deriving from its proximity to its beginnings’ (INV: 3 - 4). Jazz is the art form which manages to bridge the gap between life and art and not Dada, as conventional wisdom claims. Indeed, Trocchi saw Dada as useless precisely because of its incapacity to produce an

‘alternative to the existing social order. What were we to do after we had painted a moustache on the Mona Lisa?’ (INV: 4).

For *sigma*, then, one of the most stringent problems was to creatively invent new means of distribution for art and literature that would interrupt the mechanised flux of news colonising our free time. Pamphlets and pamphleteering, for example, are seen as pivotal, just as much as any other expressive tactics which would break through traditional media: advertising in the space of little magazines, the personal columns of national newspapers, labels, matchboxes, toilet paper, cigarette cards, the back of playing cards etc, as much as writing entire books. In the *Invisible Insurrection* Trocchi imagined ‘a publishing project’ that would occupy the advertisement panels of London Underground stations for one year and where a monthly or weekly magazine would be printed. ‘And why stop at London? (Undergrounds of the World Unite!)’ (BLU: 2).

This project was, in fact, put into practice and resulted in the *Moving Times* poster: a large A0-size off-set print with literary texts signed by, among others, Trocchi and William Burroughs. The poster itself was unspectacularly devised: various texts of different lengths were placed in rectangular boxes, separated from one from another. The texts were conventionally signed by their authors. But it is evident that both the formal layout, based on vertical and horizontal lines, and the content of the assorted texts are expressions of the same idea – of creative disunity, textual and visual articulation without any central theme or core. *Moving Times* - the times in movement, the temporality that moves from a standstill - seem to capture the times when such literary productions, published and shown under these conditions of production and distribution, are happening. The texts themselves present a mixture of ‘fragments’ of literary pieces, paragraphs from manifestos, and allusions to the

sigma portfolio. Not many issues of the *Moving Times* have been published, and the poster itself looked, indeed, quite unfamiliar to the potential reader (Trocchi and Nuttall, 1965). Closely following Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, Trocchi did, indeed, suggest that one of the objectives of *sigma*'s production and distribution is to break down the dichotomy between creator and spectator, using the unfamiliar as a tool.

***sigma* and the Contemporary**

In 'Sick', the fourth chapter of his *Bomb Culture*, Nuttall recalled that 'Alex Trocchi once told me he first took heroin for the sense of inviolability it gave him.' And then he continued: 'If the cool hipster is severed from identificatory processes and thus from other people's pleasure and pain, he is nevertheless an athlete of time' (1968: 133). Drugs have surely been one of the counter-culture's preferred means to buy time for unlearning what has been learned, and for exploring the 'astronautics of the inner space'. For Nuttall, drugs, together with an excessive emphasis on movement and mobility, celebrated in the 'mobile arts, poetry, jazz, theatre, dance and clothes' of the early 1960s, had already proven to be 'good tactics but a poor alternative to the established culture. [They are] the temporary denial of existence and existence must be our ultimate province' (1968: 243). *Bomb Culture*, published during the period of the 1968 student riots and occupations would, in fact, claim that

[I]t is now necessary to come back from inner space. Having revived the faculty of wonderment it is necessary to apply it [...]. If we cannot translate the spiritual into terms of constructive physical action, if spiritual vision cannot inform our physical ocular vision, then the spiritual is none of our damn business' (Nuttall, 1968: 242).

Nuttall's predicament seems to apply directly to Trocchi, one of the 1960s 'athletes of time' and an 'astronaut of the inner space'. One cannot fail to observe the inner contradiction between Trocchi's lifelong addiction and the sense of inviolability in the claims of *sigma*.

The invisible insurrection was supposed to be inevitable and already underway: ‘It is happening all over the world’ (GEN: 3). There is much ‘tentative optimism’ here, based on the reading of a myriad of ‘happenings’: ‘Joan Littlewood’s experiments, and Burroughs’, Laing’s post-Sartrean psychotherapeutic techniques, or the *Meat Science Essays* of M. McLure’ (GEN: 4). It is a legitimate question in relation to *sigma*, whether this optimism was at all warranted.

From the perspective of a certain kind of realism – the realism of 1960s capitalism, but also, more importantly, from the perspective of the realism of our capitalism - optimism emerges against all odds, against the reality of corporeal and mental illness, and against the seeming impossibility to imagine a future other than the future of atomic extinction, or planetary catastrophe. We have suggested that *sigma*’s diagnoses of the 1960s bear resemblance to our contemporaneity and it is here, towards the end of this chapter, that we would like to develop this thought. Is there something in *sigma* that remains relevant for the ways in which we think about art’s autonomy and art’s power to ‘do’ politics? To ask about the warranty of political optimism, precisely in relation to art politics and art activism, is to ask: why hope? and why resist?

We would like to approach these questions through a brief consideration of two authors already mentioned in this chapter: Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi and Mark Fisher. What is of interest to us is the manner in which they have considered the relation between our contemporaneity and the imagination, vision, visuality and ideology of possible futures. Berardi identifies an unyielding trust in the future in the historical avant-gardes of the first seven decades of the twentieth century, fuelled by utopian imagination and ideology of progressive future. In the aftermath of 1968, however, utopia transformed into dystopia; and the last utopia of the

twentieth century – the cyberculture that wired the brain to cyberspace and cyber time – ended in mental exhaustion. What seems to characterise our current semiocapitalist, post-cyberculture condition, is depression – both economic depression but also corporeal fatigue and mental depression. He writes:

The future becomes a threat when the collective imagination becomes incapable of seeing alternatives to trends leading to devastation, increased poverty and violence. This is precisely our current situation, because capitalism has become a system of techno-economic automatisms that politics cannot evade. The paralysis of the will (the impossibility of politics) is the historical context of today's depression epidemic. (Berardi, 2011: 59)

Berardi's 'paralysis of the will' points to a real foreclosure of the horizon of any future politics, and his thought finds an echo in Mark Fisher's *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), whose first chapter glosses over 'the slow cancellation of the future': the disappearance of the future, most visible in the realm of contemporary culture, where time, instead of going forwards, runs backwards, in a constant return of zombified revivals of cultural forms and styles:

If the late 1970s and early 80s were the moment when the current crisis of cultural temporality could first be felt, it was only during the first decade of the twenty-first century that what Simon Reynolds calls 'dyschromia' has become endemic. This dyschromia, this temporal disjuncture, ought to feel uncanny, yet the predominance of what Reynolds calls 'retromania' means that it has lost any *unheimlich* charge: anachronism is now taken for granted (Fisher, 2014: 14).

Both Berardi and Fisher are amongst the strongest advocates for a repoliticisation of mental health, following the attempts of Foucault, Laing, or Deleuze and Guattari in the 1960s and 1970s. Both argue for a direct link between semiocapitalism, or 'capitalist realism' (Fisher),

and depression. Fisher describes the realism of capitalism as a ‘deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion’ (Fisher, 2009: 5), whilst the first chapter of his *Capitalist Realism* claims that it has become easier to image the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

For Fisher, himself battling depression, there seems to be little hope for a strategy of de-cancelling future. However, Berardi struggles to find an answer to the question: where is the hope? His answer is bafflingly simple: we must resist because we simply do not know, and cannot know, what will happen after the future, ‘and I must preserve the consciousness and sensibility of social solidarity, of human empathy, of gratuitous activity – of freedom, equality, and fraternity. Just in case, right?’ (2011: 163). It seems to us that precisely in these ‘just in case’, or ‘as if’, rests the essence of the political performative: act ‘as if’ your act matters, publish ‘just in case’ a million readers will read you, unlearn everything you know ‘just in case’ this will open up new sensibilities and patterns of thought, make political art ‘as if’ it will create political reality.

It is in Berardi’s elaboration of reasons for resistance that we find the strongest resonances with *sigma*: his text appears to us, indeed, as *sigmatic*. For in the Italian author’s predicament that the political task of the future is the creation of a form of self-consciousness for the presently ignorant general intellect (2011: 163) we identify a resonance with *sigma*’s insurrection of a million minds. And Berardi’s invisible insurrection would essentially take place through a novel form of colonisation of the ‘grids of expression’:

Poetry and therapy (thera-poetry) will be the forces leading to the creation of a cognitarian self-consciousness: not a political party, not the organization of interests, but

the reactivation of the cognitarian sensibility. [...] The new space for activism is here, in the connection of poetry, therapy, and the creation of new paradigms' (2011: 163).

This new creation of paradigms cannot occur but through a 'just in case' type of thought: that after the end of future there is hope. Again, Berardi's words, this time from the *Post-Futurist Manifesto*, which would echo the *sigmatic* collaboration and self-organisation, within the spontaneous university, of poets, artists, physicists, psychotherapists, and neurobiologists: 'We demand that art turns into a life-changing force. We seek to abolish the separation between poetry and mass communication, to reclaim the power of media from the merchants and return it to the poets and the sages' (2011: 166).

Thera-poetry – a *sigmatic* neologism that we would like to use, alongside Berardi, in order to describe the space and temporality for contemporary art activism. It encapsulates the refusal of traditional party politics, and the mobilisation of tactics meant to 'seize the grid of expression' that would turn art into a 'life-changing force'.

What we need to retain from *sigma*, however, is that thera-poetry cannot take place unless the individual subject is replaced in its social nexus. Activism as 'living art' is necessarily an 'art of living' within communities, right in the heart of our towns and cities: it is viral, infiltrating and exfiltrating the grids of official culture and politics. The spontaneous university, placed on a river bank outside of London, failed to happen. However, the London Anti-University happened in 1968, as well as a myriad of independent hubs of militant knowledge that continue to emerge on the globe. And it is here, at the level of strategic alliance, where *sigma* needs to take place: simply because we cannot know what comes after the end of future, just 'as if' an insurrectionary alliance becomes the future's political realism.

Endnotes

ⁱ The claim that art activism is ‘doing’ politics with art is based on Dorothea von Hantelmann’s analyses of ‘things done with art’ (see Hantelmann, 2010).

ⁱⁱ See Alberro and Stimson (2009) for an anthology of programmatic texts offering an understanding of scope and specificity of institutional critique’s different ‘waves’.

ⁱⁱⁱ In addition to the reading of *sigma* as an offshoot of Situationism International (eg. Wark, 2011; Gardiner, 2006). Gill Tasker (2016) proposes a reading of *sigma* through the lens of existential philosophy.

^{iv} Compare, for example, with the visually rich narratives of Kingsley Hall in Mary Barnes’ and Joseph Berke’s accounts, in Barnes (1973).

^v There exists a strong resonance with this idea and Félix Guattari’s idea of production of subjectivity according a new aesthetic paradigm. See for example Guattari (1995)

^{vi} Compare this with the discussions on the figure of ‘exile’ emerging from the academic (re)discovery of Deleuze and Guattari.

^{vii} There is a striking resemblance between the project of the spontaneous university and Fourier’s *phalanstère* (see Beecher and Bienvenu, 1971), a comparison which we cannot pursue in the present study.

^{viii} In the past decade there has been a renewed interest in ‘unlearning’ and ‘deschooling.’ For example, Nora Sternfeld organised a two-year MA programme in Curating, Managing and Mediating Art at Aalto University around these topics (Sternfeld, 2016). In 2010 Serpentine Galleries organised a research conference titled ‘Deschooling Society’ (Serpentine Galleries, 2010). Noteworthy is Irit Rogoff’s insistence on processes of ‘unframing’ knowledge within the contemporary university (Rogoff, 2010). These themes can be traced back to Paul Goodman and Ivan Illich’s ideas as formulated in Goodman (1964) and Illich (1971).

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GEN = *sigma: general information* (A. Trocchi)

INV = *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds* (A. Trocchi)

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